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Dimensions of Engagement: Politics and Aesthetics in Heinrich Böll's Early Fiction

The due proportion of political engagement and aesthetic autonomy has been a hotly contested issue in German literature since the end of World War II. At its most conspicuous the dispute was carried out in the form of *Literaturstreite*, extensive public debates among authors, critics, and scholars, which included, for example, the struggle over aesthetic autonomy vs. Socialist Realism during the formalism debate in 1949 and 1950, the conflict over aestheticism vs. engagement in the *Zürcher Literaturstreit* in 1966 and 1967, the 1968 debates on the death of literature, and the inter-German *Literaturstreit* following Christa Wolf's "Was bleibt" in 1990.¹ *Literaturstreite* have served as a workable forum to periodically re-negotiate the spectrum of possible positions on the relationship between the political substance of literature on the one hand, and its aesthetic value on the other. More importantly, their regular recurrence in the public arena, rather than only in the limited realm of literature or the academy, underscores how charged the issue has been—no matter how disparate the opinions in various instances of *Literaturstreite*, none of these debates would have occurred without a general consensus that the status of the political in literature was a matter of crucial importance. The fundamental question at the root of the dispute has been, and remains, how much political engagement aesthetic distinction can bear. Or asked in reverse, to what extent autonomous art² can be political.

Although this was not a new question in the post-World War II era, it gained heightened significance in the immediate postwar years. At a time when German identity was at stake along with peace and stability in the region, many writers reflected on the possibilities for literature to contribute to the constitution of a new Germany. As Ralf Schnell suggested, it is therefore impossible to understand the development of contemporary German literature without an acute conception of its formative stage in the mid to late 1940s. Developments during the formative years of postwar German literature foreshadowed fairly accurately the concurrent power and impotence of literature in the German public arena (Schnell 71-72), as well as the ongoing debate on the role literature could play in the realm of politics. For example, the 1947 pan-German *Schriftstellerkongress* assembled writers across the

spectrum of postwar literary production—avantgardists, realists, exiles, inner émigrés, conservatives, communists, luminaries, and neophytes—because they believed that a single-language culture could help surmount the political divisiveness of the time. Writers who attended the *Schriftstellerkongress* were deeply invested in the idea that literature could and should have an impact on the socio-political sea change that was taking place. Yet at the same time it was precisely the profound disagreement over how literature could aid the construction of a unified and peaceful Germany that led to the ultimate failure of the *Schriftstellerkongress* project (Schnell 74–75).

One strand of writing that emerged in this precarious and complex postwar climate is particularly noteworthy for embracing socio-political and ethical concerns while preserving the aesthetic integrity of the literary word. In effect, it conjoined political engagement and autonomous aesthetics. The reliance on a distinctly literary idiom prevented a mimetic reproduction of reality along with its discursive rules. By suspending the rules of non-literary discourse, such writing expanded the possibilities of unconventional political thought. Moreover, it opened new modes of relating to the realm of the political, thereby enabling a unique form of criticism. In a recent study on "Literatur als Widerstand" Bertram Salzmann demonstrated that authors as diverse as Ilse Aichinger, Ingeborg Bachmann, Max Frisch, Wolfgang Hilbig, Günter Kunert, Siegfried Lenz, Peter Weiss, and Christa Wolf concurred in their commitment to a form of nonconformist literature whose critical potential rested first and foremost in its aesthetic form (331, 335). The form of their texts, rather than any overtly political choice of themes and subjects, posed a challenge to familiar habits of perception. It made the ordinary seem strange and removed the seemingly familiar from the "automatism of perception" (Jusdanis 45). Tapping into a wide range of figurative possibilities, a literature that conjoined political engagement and aesthetic autonomy afforded the opportunity to critique non-literary discourses without participating in them. Similarly, by insisting on non-linear, multidimensional representation, it replaced commonplace observations with unusual, provocative, and unsettling perspectives. In general, by augmenting the sensitivity of the reader, the form of such texts opens the possibility of a more conscious and thoughtful engagement with reality, past and present (Salzmann 338).

Literature conjoining political engagement and aesthetic autonomy was vital for the development of postwar German literature, because it continued the legacy of modernism after the Nazi period, while re-conceptualizing it in light of the catastrophic experience of the Third Reich. Yet it represents a relatively understudied area of postwar German literature, possibly because it may have lent itself less readily to literary-historical categorization than, for example, more traditional political literature on one end of the spectrum, or the conservative modernism of Gottfried Benn and his followers on the other.³ The lack of comprehensive scholarly accounts notwithstanding, this

form of writing was fairly well theorized at the time. We find traces in poetological texts by a range of authors,⁴ and, more systematically, in Theodor W. Adorno's thinking on narrative literature. Although Adorno is not generally seen as a principal theoretician of postwar prose, he nonetheless supplied some of the most insightful reflections on the issue. Indeed, in the 1950s and '60s he was one of the key proponents of a literature that bridges the gap between advocating a particular political cause and producing literary *l'art pour l'art*. His aesthetic theory developed in parallel to a body of texts that adapted modernism to the postwar context, and both share a number of basic premises.

One of the fundamental propositions of Adorno's aesthetic theory maintains that any form of authentic art negates the societal status quo as a matter of course. Consequently, good literature in his view had to be the "Kontroverse zwischen engagierter Kunst und l'art pour l'art, über der Alternative zwischen der Banausie der Tendenzkunst und der Banausie der genießerischen" ("Erzähler" 47). Adorno insisted on the reconciliation of engagement and autonomy, because he saw autonomy as the very condition of art's social purpose. That is to say, art can only stand in opposition to society from the vantage point of a separate idiom: "Indem sie sich als Eigenes in sich kristallisiert, anstatt bestehenden gesellschaftlichen Normen zu willfahren und als 'gesellschaftlich nützlich' sich zu qualifizieren, kritisiert sie die Gesellschaft, durch ihr bloßes Dasein" (*Ästhetische Theorie* 335). In addition to defining a space for this form of opposition, autonomous principles provide the literary means of capturing the specific reality of late modern society. Modernity in its complexity defies any comprehensive grasp, and warrants narrative forms that embrace this incomprehensibility, rather than conceal it. In Adorno's view, anti-realist narrative literature was especially suited to this goal: "die universale Entfremdung und Selbstentfremdung fordert beim Wort gerufen zu werden, und dazu ist der Roman qualifiziert wie wenig andere Kunstformen. [...] Das antirealistische Moment des neuen Romans, seine metaphysische Dimension, wird selber gezeitigt von seinem realen Gegenstand, einer Gesellschaft, in der die Menschen voneinander und von sich selber gerissen sind" ("Erzähler" 43). These characteristics of late modern society are, in Adorno's view, beyond the grasp of the traditional narrator.

The role of the narrator was further destabilized by the specific historic experience of World War II. Adorno showed that the unity and coherence of experience, which had once provided the foundation for a narrator's credibility, had vanished under the vastness of the catastrophe:

Zerfallen ist die Identität der Erfahrung, das in sich kontinuierliche und artikuliert Leben, das die Haltung des Erzählers einzig gestattet. Man braucht nur die Unmöglichkeit sich zu vergegenwärtigen, dass irgendeiner, der am Krieg teilnahm, von ihm so erzählte, wie früher einer von seinen Abenteuern erzählte" ("Erzähler" 42).

The specific historical event of World War II—understood as the epitome of modernity—calls for new aesthetic forms beyond the limited perspective of a single narrator. It demands a degree of complexity that the traditional narrator can no longer command.

As the narrator is no longer able to make sense of the world for the reader, literature ought to create alternate forms to embody the modern state of being. Literature can no longer capture reality—*Wirklichkeit*—by way of photographic or perspectival depiction, “sondern nur dadurch, dass sie [die Kunst] vermöge ihrer autonomen Konstitution ausspricht, was von der empirischen Gestalt der Wirklichkeit verschleiert wird” (“Versöhnung” 264). Adorno bases his assertion on the premise that “Erkenntnis in der Kunst ästhetisch vermittelt [ist]; d.h. Kunst ist nicht Realität, sondern zugleich Wesen und Bild” (“Versöhnung” 261). Thus aesthetic form itself must serve as the medium of cognition.

Implied in all of these reflections are several essential propositions for a viable literary response to post-World War II reality. First, literature ought to have something to say about reality. And second, realism as an aesthetic form is no longer able to convey reality. Or, in Adorno’s own words: “*Will der Roman seinem realistischen Erbe treu bleiben und sagen, wie es wirklich ist, so muss er auf einen Realismus verzichten, der, indem er die Fassade reproduziert, nur dieser bei ihrem Täuschungsgeschäfte hilft*” (“Erzähler” 43; italics are the author’s). Furthermore, literature ought to bring to light aspects of reality that do not lie in plain view. To do so, it employs figurative means, such as allegories, metaphors, allusions, but also—and this is of particular importance for the literary text that I will examine on the following pages—voids and gaps, or carefully evoked blind spots, which unearth areas deliberately concealed by society.

In 1949, the year the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, Heinrich Böll published an extended short story entitled “Der Zug war pünktlich.” Despite favourable reviews, it was not a great success, selling only 346 copies in the first year and a half.⁵ Neither did it receive much public or scholarly attention in later years.⁶ Yet for a number of reasons, it is a particularly compelling example of a literary text that challenged the political horizon of its time from the perspective of its own, distinct discursive realm. By relying on a separate, strictly literary idiom, the text distances itself from a discursive system that, in the postwar era, tended to reproduce the “false order” of previous decades (Nägele 185). It thus implemented many of the attributes Adorno regarded as essential for any form of contemporary art, chipping away at the façade of a constructed reality, exposing it as constructed, and conjuring up the spectre of a repressed discourse.⁷ In this respect, it is an apposite illustration for the kind of literature invested in conjoining political engagement and aesthetic autonomy as it emerged in the immediate postwar era. Böll’s text is also an interesting case to consider because it forces us to rethink some of the standard notions that are often applied to his oeuvre. For many decades he was considered

the "conscience of the nation"—a designation foregrounding overtly political texts, such as *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, and alluding to his extra-literary standing as one of the Federal Republic's most prominent public intellectuals. This Böll has come under attack in recent years. When Ulrich Greiner coined the term *Gesinnungsästhetik* during the 1990 *Literaturstreit*—a form of writing that sacrificed aesthetic quality for the sake of a clear moral or political message, in Greiner's words "die Verbindung von Idealismus und Oberlehrertum,"—he identified Heinrich Böll as its primary representative. Considering this pervasive image of the highly politicized author, it may seem counterintuitive to place a text like "Der Zug war pünktlich" in the same category of early postwar writing as the highly imaginative texts of Arno Schmidt, Ilse Aichinger, and Ingeborg Bachmann. It may seem equally counterintuitive to consider Böll's writing in the context of Adorno's aesthetic theory. Yet as the close examination of "Der Zug war pünktlich" will reveal, it might be precisely the lesser known postwar modernist Böll who deserves renewed attention. Although "Der Zug war pünktlich" is one of Böll's lesser-known texts, it foreshadows the richness of some of Böll's later novels,⁸ in addition to serving as an illustrative early example of a literature that conjoined political engagement with aesthetic autonomy.

From the onset, "Der Zug war pünktlich" proceeds in a multitude of discrete narrative strands as it follows the soldier Andreas on a train journey during the latter years of World War II. After a two-week furlough Andreas has to return to the front. As he boards the train going east, he senses suddenly that he will die before reaching his destination. The thought overcomes him inadvertently, as he steps onto the train. From the train window, he calls out to his friend on the platform: "Ich will nicht sterben," schrie er, "ich will nicht sterben. Aber das Schreckliche ist, dass ich sterben werde ... bald!" (Zug 5) The temporal adverb "bald" (soon) periodically recurs as an object of speculation in a series of inner monologues, as, for instance, in the following passage:

Bald. Bald. Bald. Bald. Wann ist bald? Welch ein furchtbares Wort: Bald. Bald kann in einer Sekunde sein, bald kann in einem Jahr sein. Bald ist ein furchtbares Wort. Dieses Bald drückt die Zukunft zusammen, es macht sie klein, und es gibt nichts Gewisses, gar nichts Gewisses, es ist die absolute Unsicherheit. Bald ist nichts und bald ist vieles. Bald ist alles. Bald ist der Tod. Bald bin ich tot. (8–9)

An extended series of such speculations over the course of the story enables Andreas to narrow down the place, and by way of deduction, the time of his own death: he eventually knows that he will die, in a matter of several days, somewhere between Lemberg and Czernowitz. Andreas' anticipation of his own death constitutes the cornerstone for the narrative project. On the one hand, it serves as a kind of skeleton holding together a diverse set of narrative strands. In the form of a recurring theme, it functions as a thread weaving through a wealth of disjointed dialogues, descriptions, memories, and

thoughts. Yet, on the other hand, the fact that it is marked so clearly as fictional—after all, it is impossible to anticipate one's own death—points the reader's attention to precisely the fictionality and unreliability of the structure itself. By introducing the impossible constellation of Andreas anticipating his own death, the story highlights the fact that it is not a realist account of a soldier's journey but, on the contrary, that it creates its own distinct reality and its own self-enclosed structure to frame the issues it raises. That is to say, the entire story is held together by a thread that deliberately exposes its own impossibility. As a result, weight is drawn away from a structure that might have provided a sense of completeness or closure, and instead is shifted toward the individual story fragments filling the spaces created by the narrative skeleton.

The story itself supplies a particularly fitting metaphor for its own narrative principle when it invokes the image of the mosaic—an object that is composed of fragments laid out next to each other, with gaps and rifts in-between. The text introduces the image of the mosaic in Andreas's conversation with Olina, a young Polish prostitute, whom he befriends shortly before his death. Olina confides to him that prostitutes all over Poland work as spies for the resistance. They elicit bits and pieces of strategic information from each of their German clients and pass it on. Then she says: "Die ganze Spionage ist ein Mosaik. Es wird alles zusammengetragen und nummeriert, jedes kleinste Fetzenchen, das wir erwischen, bis das Bild vollständig ist ... langsam wird das ausgefüllt ... und viele dieser Mosaiksteine geben das ganze Bild ... von Euch ... Eurem Krieg ... Eurer Armee ..." (110). Once a sufficient number of individual pieces have been collected and arranged, a larger image begins to emerge. A number of larger images can again be arranged to form a kind of meta-image, and so on. The image of the mosaic within the mosaic that Böll uses to illustrate the espionage of the Polish resistance parallels the narrative technique structuring the text as a whole.

On a small scale, this technique can be seen in Olina's description itself. Her way of speaking mimics the matter she describes. There are gaps in her sentences. Her speech is a compilation of ellipses. Each ellipsis contains information that, multiplied, conveys a picture, although, according to the nature of the mosaic, the final image retains voids and gaps. The same technique is at work in the story at large. "Der Zug war pünktlich" is a mosaic of impressions and innuendos. The story's individual building blocks—including episodes from Andreas's train journey, his thoughts and memories, other characters' stories, the events leading up to his death, the shift of perspective to Olina toward the end of the story, her inner monologues—all stand on their own and, at the same time, together form a multi-faceted, yet inherently incomplete and ambiguous larger image. The form of the ellipsis conjures up a state of existence in which "neither nation nor literature, which bourgeois culture presented as reciprocal alibis, can maintain a unified identity" (Berman 152).

Both Böll's modeling of his story on a spatial form of art—the mosaic—and the lack of completeness and closure inherent in the nature of the mosaic seem curiously at odds with the story's thematic scope. "Der Zug war pünktlich" is a war story—that is, a story about a particular historical experience. Our notion of history, however, hinges on narrative concepts, as Hayden White's work has shown.⁹ What are the implications of transposing history into a static image? First and foremost, it appears to be a response to the predicament of accounting—through language and narrative—for the vastness of a catastrophic event such as World War II. If traditional narrative forms no longer provide adequate means for conveying the magnitude of a catastrophe and the "dissolution of personhood" (Berman 155) associated with it, it seems only natural to turn to alternate forms of representation. The particular form of the narrative in "Der Zug war pünktlich" above all poses a challenge to a societal consensus of how to remember the past. In the specific case of Germany during the early postwar years, such an approach to writing historical experience confronted a society on the brink of repressing part of its history for the sake of keeping its burden manageable while advancing into a better future. Necessarily reductive in nature, historical and political discourse aided the collective repression by contributing to a coherent account that concealed its own curtailment and constructedness.

Böll's "Der Zug war pünktlich" above all confronted an illusion of coherence. Composed of relatively self-contained fragments, it achieves a prismatic dispersion of perspectives. As a result it draws away from a unifying, "totalizing" view, and instead produces an open form, which highlights ambiguity and unease, rather than masking it. What is more, each individual fragment within the story—each tessera to stay within the image of the mosaic—bears different strata of meaning beneath its immediate, literal surface. Each fragment encompasses not one, but a series of stories, histories, images, and fractions of information. They consist of layers of perspectives that are present in either an explicit or an implicit form. In sum, the use of the mosaic as a model for the narrative structure of the text leads to an explosion of facets and refractions of the specific historical experience of World War II. A passage in the story illustrates these observations. The passage elucidates how a politically charged issue forces its way onto the surface of the text and reveals the inherent ambivalence of what is being portrayed.

Early on in the story, Andreas sits on the train, penned in between other soldiers who, like him, are returning to the front. Contemplating his impending death, he feels lonely and desperate. In search of relief, he tries to motivate himself to pray. It seems important to him, given his situation. Yet his prayers remain mere formulae:

Jetzt werde ich beten, denkt er, alle Gebete, die ich auswendig weiß, und noch einige dazu. Er betet erst das Credo, dann Vaterunser und Ave Maria, de Profundis ... ut pupillam oculi ... Komm Heiliger Geist; noch einmal das Credo, weil es so

wunderbar vollständig ist; dann die Karfreitagsförbitten, weil sie so wunderbar umfassend sind, auch für die ungläufigen Juden. Dabei denkt er an Czernowitz, und er betet besonders für die Czernowitzer Juden und für die Lemberger Juden ... (96)

At first glance, the passage appears as not much more than a characterization of Andreas's personality. It tells us that Andreas is a devout Catholic and, anticipating an early death, turns his view to his perceived savior. He begins with three essential Christian prayers—the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ave Maria—and proceeds with slightly more obscure, yet equally formulaic pleas to God. Ultimately he devotes a separate prayer to the Jews of Lemberg and Czernowitz. Somewhere between Lemberg and Czernowitz lies the region where he feels he will die. By praying precisely for the Jews in this region he indicates his sense of empathy with them, and thereby also his opposition to the Nazi ideology and the goals of the army in which he is enlisted. This colors him as a silent dissident—somebody who, albeit quietly, opposes the extermination of Europe's Jews. All this is made explicit on the surface of the text.

More interesting, however, is what lies beneath. Of particular note in Andreas's list of prayers are the General Intercessions of the Good Friday liturgy (the *Karfreitagsförbitten*), which include the phrase "auch für die ungläufigen Juden." While on the one hand, Andreas's praying for the Jews suggests his concern for the victims of the Holocaust, on the other hand the prayer invokes an ancient justification for violence against Jews. The Christian holiday of Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of the biblical Jew Jesus, but it is also reminiscent of a long history of Christians persecuting Jews. In the dogma of the early church, the church blamed Jews collectively for the murder of the Messiah. They were deemed guilty of deicide—which in turn provoked perennial assaults against them. Historically, the Holy Week preceding Good Friday and Easter had been a time of increased pogroms, persecution, and aggression against Jews. It is known that in the early centuries of Christianity, Jews were coerced into churches on Good Fridays and, as part of the regular liturgy, forced to admit responsibility for the murder of Christ. One theological justification for this practice equated the Jews with the biblical figure of Cain, who murdered his brother, Abel. In some of the foundational scriptures of the church, this relationship between Cain and the Jews was explicated in great detail. The church father St. Augustine, for example, devoted a long passage in his polemic treatise *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* to the homology of Cain and the Jews, which includes the following explanation: "And what answer can the Jews give at this day, when we ask them with the voice of God, that is, of the sacred Scriptures, about Christ, except that they do not know the Christ that we speak of? Cain's ignorance was pretended, and the Jews are deceived in their refusal of Christ. ... So the voice of God in the Holy Scriptures accuses the Jews."¹⁰ In the twentieth century this prolonged

tradition of theologically sanctioned aggression against Jews became secularized and contributed to National Socialist Anti-Semitism, yet it did not disappear entirely—a fact, of which Böll was acutely aware.¹¹

The particular phrase Böll uses in Andreas's prayer, "auch für die ungläubigen Juden," cites the standard German translation of *Oremus et pro perfidis Judaeis*—let us pray also for the perfidious Jews. It is one of the eight segments of the General Intercessions on Good Friday, and German Catholics recited it in this exact wording until the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. That is to say, from the time when Böll alluded to it in "Der Zug war pünktlich," the practice remained in use for another decade and a half. By referring to this questionable *oratio* for the "perfidious" Jews, the passage not only embraces the full, extensive history of Christians violating and murdering Jews. It also exposes a highly problematic liturgical practice, which seems as if it should have been unacceptable after the Holocaust, yet remained in use for some time. Beyond evoking a repressed, violent history, it critiques a disturbing practice that continued into the postwar, post-Holocaust present.¹²

What I hope has become apparent from the analysis of Andreas's prayer is the text's saturation with ambiguous and conflicting nuances. Although Andreas positions himself outside of the prevailing Nazi ideology and prays for the victims of the Holocaust, he hardly achieves a higher moral standing. Rather, the mechanics of the text draw the reader's attention from conscious, deliberate, intentional discourse to what normally remains muted and repressed. Lurking underneath Andreas's well-meaning prayers is a history of violence and murder.¹³ Andreas's reflections propel an engagement with complicated moral and ethical concerns. Especially their unexpressed subtext opens the issue into a set of questions and possible considerations that lack definitive, conclusive answers.

The evocation of the muted history of the Holocaust in the prayer passage resonates in a series of episodes, motifs, and topoi dispersed throughout the text. Most prominently, concatenations of recurring images, such as trains, crowds, and Andreas's certainty of death, evoke as their repressed counter-image the horror of trains leading to the death camps. At the very place where Andreas feels he will die, between Lemberg and Czernowitz, the entire Jewish population is being deported, by train, to their deaths in the camps. Indeed, the story takes place at the exact time—the summer of 1943—when the liquidation of most ghettos and labor camps in the area was being completed. One by one, towns in Galicia and the Bukowina reported the conclusion of their cleansing operations.

Although the story invokes the two cities in Galicia and the Bukowina, they remain of marginal importance for the setting of the plot. Andreas dies before ever arriving in Czernowitz, and likewise Lemberg—a place where Andreas does spend one night—is hardly brought into focus as a place of geographic significance. Rather than any substantive reality, Lemberg and

Czernowitz taken together comprise a central topos of the story. Once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, they call to mind the multilingual, multicultural variant of a *Culturstaat* with a strong affinity to German culture (Menninghaus)¹⁴—an irretrievable ideal at the time of war-waging nationalism, when the story takes place. Likewise, the presence of the once Germanophile Jewish population in these areas has become an ideal beyond anyone's grasp. Reciting in his mind the names of towns located between Lemberg and Czernowitz, Andreas realizes with shock: "Um Gottes Willen, ich muss noch für die Juden von Stryj beten. Hoffentlich sind noch Juden in Stryj ..." (96). The "noch" in his thought—hopefully there are *still* Jews in Stryj—appears shockingly accepting of the deportations. In Andreas' mind, the transition from Lemberg, Czernowitz, and Stryj as metonymies for the *Culturstaat* ideal to signifiers of murder and deportation has been completed. Andreas' unreflected use of "noch" indicates his full submission to this new reality. It is not the genocide that provokes his concern, but merely his absent-mindedness in praying for its victims. With the gesture, the "noch," he reproduces the language of the perpetrators and inadvertently aligns himself with them. That is to say, even though Andreas evokes the topos Lemberg/Czernowitz in a benevolent gesture, he at the same time contributes to its resignification. With regard to the story at large, the topos Lemberg/Czernowitz fulfills a dual purpose. It signifies simultaneously the imaginary ideal of a multicultural society and its opposite, the site of racially motivated genocide, and thus exposes him as complicit in the genocide.

Incidentally, we now know from the *Nachlass* that Böll had originally envisioned the charged topos for the title of the story. When he first submitted the story to Middlehaue Verlag, it was called "Zwischen Lemberg und Czernowitz." Only after a prolonged period of pressure from the editor did Böll agree to change "Zwischen Lemberg und Czernowitz" to the much more neutral heading "Der Zug war pünktlich."¹⁵ However, the spatial connotation of "Zwischen Lemberg und Czernowitz" would have been more consistent with the project of the story than the temporal association of "Der Zug war pünktlich." The modelling of the narrative on a spatial form of art—the mosaic—resists a temporal, or even a chronological, order. The absence of temporal progression is further underscored by the text's transposition of time into space. Between the loosely connected narrative fragments that make up the story, the different layers of time—past, present, and future—are collapsed into one. The past is as much a part of the text's present as is the anticipated future. By suspending the natural progression of time, the story defies the concept of overcoming the past. In the absence of a coherent plot in temporal terms, the story is driven by a different kind of progress, namely Andreas's coming ever closer to his death. This progress is measured first and foremost spatially. While Andreas originally felt that he would die soon, "bald," he subsequently begins to conceive of the temporal adverb "bald" in spatial

terms, as for example in the following remark: "Das Bald ist noch enger geworden, ganz eng" (43). Likewise, his life becomes quantifiable in terms of distance; it is "nur noch eine bestimmte Kilometerzahl, eine Eisenbahnstrecke" (14). At the beginning of his journey, an immense distance lies ahead of him, spanning most of Germany, as well as vast occupied territories further east. As the train approaches the place where he will die, the world around him shrinks to an ever-smaller area. The text registers this dwindling in Andreas's periodic reflections on the world that is lost to him: "Alles, was der Zug hinter sich lässt, lass auch ich endgültig hinter mir, denkt er. Nichts mehr, nichts mehr werde ich sehen" (22). "Nie mehr werde ich Deutschland sehen, Deutschland ist weg" (40). "Niemals mehr werde ich den Rhein sehen. Der Rhein. Der Rhein. Niemals mehr" (40). "[I]ch bin in Galizien. In meinem ganzen Leben werde ich nichts anderes mehr sehen als Galizien. ... Auf hundertzwanzig Kilometer ist mein Leben schon in Galizien eingengt, in Galizien" (76).

As the wheels of the train cut through the lands, they also fragment and dismember Andreas's life: "diese Räder zerschleifen mein Leben, zerfasern mein Leben" (46). Toward the end of the story, he leaves Lemberg in a car heading for a train station farther along the way. Suddenly the car is hit by explosives and torn apart. Just as the German Reich has gradually disappeared from Andreas' map, now his body—the body of the German soldier—is disappearing from his perception; in dying, Andreas wonders, "und meine Beine... meine Arme, bin ich denn nur noch Kopf..." (137).

Shortly before the explosion, Andreas feels compelled to pray one last time. And once more, it is only a liturgical formula that comes to his mind: "seine Lippen beginnen das Wort zu formen: Introibo" (137). "Introibo" is the first word in the opening of the Latin Mass. The complete phrase should have been *Introibo ad Altare Dei*, I will enter the Altar of God. In the story the phrase is truncated. A period appears behind the word *Introibo*, reining in Andreas's prayer and suggesting that there is no place for him to enter. The period visually signifies the end of Andreas's journey. In this moment, both he and the world around him are reduced to a graphic dot on the page, devoid of any meaning. What is more, as it is preceded by the "Introibo," the graphic mark also takes the place of God's altar, thus muting all hopes of redemption. Andreas will go—hence the *Introibo*—but there is no place for him to go. The period behind "Introibo" is as strong a signal of futility as is Andreas's unheroic fatal dismemberment.

The circumstances of Andreas's death ironically invert the customary endowment of a soldier's death with meaning. Official letters of condolence to the families of a deceased soldier routinely cited the oath "für Führer, Volk, und Vaterland," whose wording suggested a gain rather than a loss. It created the illusion that deducting the life of a son or husband or father from one side of the scale had, in fact, not been in vain, because it added weight to the other side

—"Führer, Volk, und Vaterland." In the case of Andreas, however, this calculation does not come out even. We learn that he feels no allegiance to "Führer, Volk, und Vaterland." Furthermore, the "Vaterland" had ceased to exist well before he was killed—bit by bit, the farther east his train advanced. At the time of his death he had not only already disengaged from "Führer" and "Volk" and lost the "Vaterland," but as an unfortunate addition, he also finds himself deprived of religious redemption. He dies an utterly meaningless, insignificant death.¹⁶ With this final scene, the story invokes, and at the same time debunks, the myth of the heroic death of the soldier.

The passages I have examined so far shed light primarily on Böll's use of form to expose and call into question conventions of remembering the past. Overall the story highlights contingency over order and dwells on instances that on the one hand display an individual's integrity, yet on the other are internally ambiguous, contradictory, or destructive. With its focus on recent history, it penetrates conventions of remembrance that form the basis for contemporary practices.

Borrowing Hayden White's terminology, the narrative technique in "Der Zug war pünktlich" is best described as an intransitive emplotment of historical events. With this concept White responds to the question of whether it is possible to represent responsibly phenomena as extreme as Nazism and the Holocaust in historical or fictional modes, that is, through symbols, plot types and genres that have been passed down in culture. White rejects the notion that certain events warrant silence and resist translation into literary forms. Both history and literature are related, as both have to rely on language and narrative forms, a fact that renders neither of the two a "neutral 'container' of historical fact" (White 42). That is, if Nazism and the Holocaust can be represented in historical discourse, they should also be representable in literature.

Appropriate literary responses to events that challenge representation, according to White, include certain modernist practices, which resemble Roland Barthes' notion of the "middle voice," a term referring to the grammatical intransitive. White suggests that in the absence of a grammatical realization for the intransitive mode, equivalents of a grammatical "middle voice" can be achieved through forms of narrative that actively undermine the realist illusion of an author in command of a singular, objective reality. Such narrative strategies include the abandonment of the omniscient narrator, subjectivizing techniques such as stream of consciousness, *erlebte Rede* or inner monologue, the blurring of the distinction between exterior and interior time, and the representation of events not as successive episodes of a story, but as random occurrences (White 40). In "Der Zug war pünktlich" Böll employs many of these modes. Narrative strategies such as shifting perspectives, voids and gaps, the episodic character of the story, the tendency to "spatialize" through montage what had traditionally been a "time form," leitmotifs, the reduction of narrated time, and the ensuing stasis of the plot: all are symptomatic of

Böll's interpretation of the historical events to which the story alludes (Reid 111). The contingency of the fragments that make up the story reveals the aporia of recounting this particular historical experience in any form of totality. It underlines the immensity, diversity, and incomprehensibility of the horrors people endured during the war. The tragedies of war are broken up into small glimpses that surface in individual episodes of the story, or sometimes even in unattached allusions, figures of speech, or symbols. The text leaves no room for redemption, heroism, or glorification, and thus underscores the absurdity and meaninglessness of death.

The artistic reality of "Der Zug war pünktlich," its *Wirklichkeit*, represents a complex response to an actual societal predicament of the late 1940s. In 1949, Germany was well on its way to recovery. At this time of future-oriented optimism, the story works against the mitigation of war and war crimes, including the Holocaust, in the public memory. It does so by confronting the socio-political phenomenon of repression on two different levels: on the one hand overtly, through the genre of the war story, and on the other hand more covertly, in the mechanics of the text. It is precisely the story's open form that contrasts with, among other things, the coherence of the new Federal Republic's foundational myths, such as the highly pervasive myth of the *Neuanfang*. Considering these characteristics, the story should be read as a politically engaged text not only because it touches on issues repressed in larger public discourse, but also because, through its particular narrative form, it offers an alternative view of the prehistory of the newly forming social and political order.

In telling this prehistory of the new state, the text engages with the reality of its time in much the same way that Adorno envisioned. It employs its own literary idiom to bypass the limitations of non-literary discourse, thus infinitely expanding the spectrum of possibilities for conceiving of the new nation.¹⁷ What is more, structural qualities, including the layering of multiple dimensions, the modeling of the narrative form on the spatial image of the mosaic, and the story's fanning out into a range of narrative strands comprising multiple perspectives, testify to the predicament of depicting reality in any form of totality. The text does not advocate a particular political position, as does *Tendenzkunst*. Rather than offering definitive answers, it is constructed to raise questions in and invite reflection by the reader. Yet, neither does it turn its back on reality, as does art for art's sake. In keeping with Adorno's central demand for a literature that effectively engages with its time, Böll's "Der Zug war pünktlich" transcends the distinction between the two poles and offers an aesthetically and intellectually compelling view of a set of politically charged issues.

The political implications of the text—its alternative emplotment of the war experience, the figuration of collectively repressed discourses, the irony with which it approaches sacrosanct rituals and conventions—do not reduce

the text's aesthetic complexity. Rather, aesthetic complexity is the central precondition to the politics of the story. By adhering to the principles of aesthetic autonomy, the text develops an idiom that cracks the surface of familiar concepts and beliefs, and exposes what lies beneath. It invites its readers to engage with a disturbing and inherently ambiguous notion of history and to think through its implications for their contemporary society. If we were to include this variant of political literature in our rather narrow concept of political engagement, the literature of the immediate postwar years and the Adenauer era might seem much less bleak than it often does. Recovering this literary history in its precise features has important implications not only for our view of early postwar literature, but also for our understanding of literary traditions that extend into the present.

Notes

¹ Wegmann discusses these major debates on literature as "a recurrent communicative event" in contemporary Germany (201).

² Autonomy is here to be understood in the broadest sense as a quality situating art in a separate domain of social practice, emphasizing its own internal relations. Kant captured this quality in his famously paradoxical phrase "Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck."

³ Even some contemporary literary histories assume the homogeneity of postwar political writing. For example, Heinz Schlaffer claimed in his popular 2002 *Kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* that in fact most postwar literary production was driven primarily by a commitment to political and moral issues. This commitment, he argued, resulted in several decades of aesthetically inferior writing, thereby suggesting that a necessary tradeoff exists between political engagement and aesthetic innovation. Furthermore, Schlaffer considers the alleged lack of aesthetic quality a logical consequence of the Second World War: "Die deutschen Schriftsteller sind—wie nach der Katastrophe des Dritten Reiches nicht anders zu erwarten—'engagierte Publizisten mit literarischen Ambitionen' oder zumindest engagierte Literaten mit politischen Ambitionen geworden und geblieben" (148). That is to say, if an author had lived through the war, he or she was predisposed to produce morally justifiable, but otherwise uninteresting works. Schlaffer thus claims that the artistic instinct of a whole generation of writers was inhibited by something inherent to the experience of the war.

⁴ Examples include Hans Erich Nossack's insightful defense of aesthetic autonomy in "Über den Einsatz," Ingeborg Bachmann's seminal "Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen," Paul Celan's famous Büchner Prize Speech "Der Meridian," Ilse Aichinger's short essay "Der geheime Leonce," and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's "The End of Fiction."

⁵ For a detailed account of Böll's initial position in the literary marketplace see Finlay. Walter Hinderer has pointed out that those postwar texts that engaged with Germany's horrid past in a critical, complex manner were doomed to reach but the

slimmest fraction of the German population. Ultimately, it was not Koeppen, or Böll, or Grass, but the aesthetically rather conventional American telecast *Holocaust* which, in 1979, shook the German audience out of its complacency (124).

⁶ The limited number of studies specifically addressing "Der Zug war pünktlich" include Delabar, Kraszewski and Luukkainen.

⁷ Despite its political content, some scholars have read "Der Zug war pünktlich" primarily as a love story. Hill, for example, argues that the story is structured around the protagonist's search for love, thus representing a more profound search for social, moral, and spiritual identity. He maintains that it is romantic love endowed with transcendental meaning that stands at the center of the plot (91).

⁸ Both thematically and aesthetically "Der Zug war pünktlich" bears much resemblance to, for example, the 1951 novel *Wo warst du, Adam?* or Böll's 1959 bestseller *Billard um halb zehn*.

⁹ White first developed this notion in *Metahistory* (1973).

¹⁰ Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* XII, 10.

¹¹ Especially in his early writing, Böll regularly invoked the link between early Christian anti-Judaism, which time and again had led to pogroms and violence, and modern, secular anti-Semitism. In his view, the Holocaust proved the ultimate failure of Christian ethics. He wrote about this failure in a range of fiction and non-fiction texts. Prominent examples include the 1947 short story "Todesursache Hakennase" and the 1956 essay "Wo ist dein Bruder." Both texts consider the implications of the biblical Cain and Abel parable for the present. In particular, the essay "Wo ist dein Bruder" ponders the ambivalence of the parable's history. The essay's title quotes the biblical Cain and Abel parable, referring to the question God put to Cain after Abel's murder. Cain denied the crime, pretending not to know where his brother was. By referring to the critical question in the Cain and Abel parable, Böll urges the reader to place the biblical text in the context of society's contemporary condition, implying the inherent immorality of answering the question. Indeed, he argues that after Auschwitz, the question "Wo ist dein Bruder" has become unanswerable ("Bruder" 167). Instead, he suggests that what really matters is the question itself. Given Germany's role in the war, it should be contemplated and re-considered over and over again, because only in a state of continuous reflection do crimes remain crimes and avoid being reduced to mere numbers in a history book, which is the first step toward the recurrence of the same crimes. With regard to these details, my reading of the essay differs sharply from previous interpretations, which tend to assume an apologetic gesture (Sackett). Taking into account Böll's practice of questioning both Christian ethics and Germany's troubled past at the same time—i.e. considering a religious context alongside a national one—will facilitate a more thoroughgoing understanding of Böll's position toward the nation.

¹² Many readings of Böll, especially with regard to the Holocaust, identify the literal meaning of a given passage with the position of the author himself. For example, Ernestine Schlant argues that Böll's narrators, like the author himself, harbor deeply rooted anti-Semitic sentiments. Referring to the war novel *Wo warst du, Adam?* she asserts: "the Catholic Böll could include Jews among Hitler's victims only when they were converted, female, and unattached. That this should be the case in a writer with an acute moral conscience shows how deeply ingrained and unconscious the prejudices against Jews were and how silently they operated" (36). I maintain that such a straightforward association of the text with the beliefs of the author is highly reductive. The

prayer passage in "Der Zug war pünktlich" is but one example of the discursive complexity of Böll's sociopolitical criticism, as it employs the evocative potential of literature specifically to expose, not reproduce, anti-Semitic practices.

¹³ My reading of Andreas's prayers differs from those of other scholars who have understood them primarily as gestures of moral integrity. For example, Delabar notes: "Die Erzählung agiert zwar nicht analytisch, und sie führt auch keine wirksame Aktion vor, die sich in den Gegensatz zum Dritten Reich setzen würde. Über die Figur Andreas bleibt sie aber nicht dem eigenen Leid verhaftet, sondern schließt sich das der anderen ... Mitleiden ist das einzige, was in der gegebenen Situation dem einzelnen noch möglich ist" (38). Kraszewski suggests that Andreas's prayer for the Jews represents a renunciation of his alignment with the Nazi state: "Such prayers for the Jews are in contradiction to the new laws and customs of the land of Andreas's birth. In opting for the ancient, merciful laws of Christian Rome over the new-fangled, tyrannical laws of neo-pagan Nuremberg, Andreas shows us that there is a higher community than that of the State which we must obey, and he identifies himself as a Catholic, rather than as a German" (290).

¹⁴ Menninghaus borrows the term *Culturstaat* from Karl Emil Franzos and argues that it contributes an idealized model to our contemporary discourse on multiculturalism (348).

¹⁵ Finlay's study of the early Böll's relations with the *Literaturbetrieb* reveals Böll's reluctance to give in to the pressures of the market. Finlay includes the following quote from a letter to Georg Zänker, managing editor of Middlehauve Verlag: "Verstehen Sie bitte, dass ich wegen des Titels unsicher bin. Es ist eine äußerst schmerzliche und gewiß gewagte Sache, auf den ursprünglichen Titel (der bestimmt der beste ist) zu verzichten. Alles weitere hat doch leicht den Anstrich der Pfuscherei." In Finlay's opinion, Böll submitted himself to the wishes of the editor to get the book on the market and alleviate his dire financial situation (106).

¹⁶ Many of Böll's early texts about the war showcase similar, utterly meaningless fatalities. The protagonist of "Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...", for example, dies, like Andreas, after losing much of his body. He is missing two arms and one leg and will not survive his injury. Nägele has pointed out that each chapter of Böll's war novel, *Wo warst du Adam?* (1951), closes with an absurd fatality, culminating in the meaningless death of the protagonist himself, the soldier Feinhals, just when he reaches the doorstep of his paternal home. The words Feinhals utters in dying are: "Sinnlos, wie vollkommen sinnlos." Nägele interprets the succession of meaningless fatalities, which are so characteristic for Böll's early writing, as a cipher for the meaninglessness of war itself. "Böll wählt das scheinbar. Untypische aus, um das Unsinnige am Typischen des Kriegs zu demonstrieren" (187).

¹⁷ Balzer understands Böll's writing as a continuation of a long literary tradition that he traces back to Novalis—a tradition that perceives literature as a means of cognition, not unlike, and certainly on a par with, historiography and other scholarly disciplines (208).

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